

CSI Durham

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Melanie Johnson '13 is a Spanish and justice studies dual major with minors in sociology and forensics. She hopes to enter the UNH master's program in justice studies this summer.

New Forensics Minor Gives Students Real Experience

There is a murder in the classroom. Not a real one: no perpetrator, no victim. Just a trail of planted evidence that needs to be collected and analyzed: glass, hair, blood, fingerprints, a bullet. Students must make sure their forensic methods are sound. Someday, another life may depend on it.

The students are in an introduction to forensic science course, one of the core courses in the new forensics minor created last fall. They're learning the scientific methods used to process crime-scene evidence. What better way than to stage a crime scene?

Melanie Johnson from Dunbarton, NH, was one of the crime-scene investigators. "We found footprints," she recalls. "We took photos, measured the size, and poured a dense liquid into the shoe print to make a casting. We found broken glass from a beaker and performed a glass density analysis to see if the glass matched pieces found on the victim. We swabbed blood trails and tested for blood type so we could make comparisons between blood evidence found in different locations."

After these and many other analyses, the students were able to match the shoe to a suspect and confirm that the bullet used in the crime came from the type of gun that he owned.

Very CSI.

The CSI television shows are, in fact, partly responsible for Johnson's interest in the field of forensics—and likely for the interest of a good many other students. "I was curious to see if what they do on those shows actually does have any basis in reality," Johnson says.

It does, she says, though the shows are prone to exaggeration. Johnson learned that while TV investigators both gather crime scene evidence and interview suspects, real forensic scientists do not interact with suspects at all. The TV labs, too, are a far cry from reality. Most crime labs don't have the funding for a room full of high-tech equipment, says Johnson. Real labs are typically small rooms stuffed with very boring-looking computers.

Maria Aiello, a forensics minor from Peabody, MA, has similar observations. One of the most inaccurate aspects of the CSI shows, she says, is the amount of time they indicate it takes to conduct forensic science.

"Unlike the two seconds it takes for a character to obtain results, it can take weeks, if not months, for a forensic professional to have the results from a piece of evidence," notes Aiello.

And forensic science is not nearly as glamorous as it's made out to be.

“In reality, evidence does not illuminate, the professionals rarely leave the small lab they work in, and they are not as attractive as they are on TV. For example, a CSI would not arrive at a crime scene in a Hummer wearing heels and a mini-skirt,” says Aiello.

Forensics student Amber Carlson of Nashua, NH, worries that the CSI shows create misinformation about the power of forensic science in our legal system and thus affect people’s expectations when faced with a real case.

“These methods are not foolproof,” says Carlson. “There are many real cases where fingerprint or DNA analysis has gone awry and innocent individuals have ended up in jail. These shows put so much weight on the evidence in the courtroom and so much weight on the expert witness, that society has a false understanding of what crime scene investigating is, what analyzing evidence is, and what expert testimony is about in the court room.”

For students interested in the justice system, the forensics courses at UNH can give them an accurate sense of both the capabilities and limitations of forensic science. For students such as Carlson, who one day may be a criminal prosecutor, the ability to understand what expert witnesses are talking about on the stand may help her be a more effective lawyer.

“There often is considerable difference between the portrayal of professions on television and in film and what it is really like to be in a profession,” says Ted Kirkpatrick, who teaches the homicide course in the forensics minor. “Ask any physician if her life compares with that of a doctor on ER. Ask a lawyer a similar question. So it is with forensic professionals. Their work lives are often tedious and methodical and not nearly as dramatic as the ones portrayed in a TV show. The justice studies faculty wants to prepare students for the real and not the imagined world.”

For information about the forensics minor and its requirements, visit www.unh.edu/colaminors/forensics.

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